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Lao PDR National Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) Programme

by Ian Mansfield, UNDP Programme Manager, Laos

Laos is a landlocked country covering 236,800 square kilometers. It shares a border with Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Myanmar. Over 70% of the country is mountains and plateaus, and two-thirds is forested.

Most of the population of four million people is settled along river valleys. The largest river, the Mekong, runs the entire length of the country and provides fertile floodplains for agriculture and is the main transportation artery. The country is divided into 17 provinces, and the capital city is Vientiane.

From 1964 to 1973 the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) suffered protracted and intense ground battles, as well as some of the heaviest aerial bombing in world history. During this period a total of 580,344 bombing missions were launched, or the equivalent of one plane-load of bombs every eight minutes around the clock for nine full years. In the course of such bombing more than two million tons of ordnance fell on Lao territory. The heaviest bombing took place in the northern provinces of Houaphan and Xieng Khouang, as well as along the full length of Lao PDR's eastern border.

Most of the bombing consisted of anti-personnel cluster bombs filled with bomblets (or "bombies" as they are known in Lao PDR), that were intended to explode on or shortly after impact. Each cluster bomb container was filled with 670 bomblets (about the size of a tennis ball), and many of them failed to explode when dropped. Whereas the manufacturers of the ordnance estimated a failure rate of some 10 per cent, it is now generally agreed that the actual failure rate may have been as high as 30 per cent. Extensive ground battles in several provinces also left a staggering amount of unexploded ordnance, including mortar and artillery shells, mines, sub-munitions and other devices of various origin.

More than 20 years after the end of the war, unexploded ordnance dropped from the air or left over from ground battles still affects many provinces. It is estimated that unexploded ordnance (UXO) contamination still affects up to 50 per cent of Lao PDR's total land mass.

In Xieng Khouang province alone, it has been found that of the hundreds of people who have been killed or injured, 45% of the casualties are children under 15 years old. When ordnance is struck by a farmer's hoe or is otherwise disturbed, it often explodes, spreading a hail of shrapnel which injures or kills anyone within close proximity. Although the bulk of easily detected UXO is left over from ground battles, ordnance dropped from the air still cause the majority of injuries and deaths. By the very nature of aerial bombing and the lack of data on ground battle locations, it is now impossible to clearly define areas

affected by UXO contamination. UXO can be anywhere, and is everywhere; in rice fields, on hill sides, in villages, along roads and in the centre of provincial towns. At present there is little accurate or verifiable data on the overall social and economic impact of UXO contamination in Lao PDR.

UXO contamination is recognized as a serious humanitarian and development problem because of the lack of financial resources available to deal with it. In the absence of any coherent clearance programme, the people most directly affected by UXO have been forced to continuously live with the problem, often with fatal consequences.

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COUNTRY REPORTS (continued)

The Effect of UXO on Development

As well as the obvious human suffering caused by UXO, their presence has a significant effect on the development of Laos. The most obvious is the denial of agricultural land of already poor and vulnerable communities. Many areas of Laos are 'rice deficient' and large tracts of land either cannot be used or are farmed at great risk. In some provinces rapid population growth following the return of people displaced by the war, is forcing more people to use ordnance infested areas. As pressure on land use grows in the years to come, accident rates are expected to increase.

The presence of mines and UXO also has an adverse effect on the environment. The Government has a programme to resettle certain highland groups who practice the environmentally damaging 'slash and burn' technique of clearing and using land. Due to the shortage of safe or cleared fields in lowland areas, this programme has often been delayed.

Another effect of UXO is the additional cost to major infrastructure development projects. All road construction, irrigation, mining and hydroelectric projects in affected areas are forced to allocate up to 10% of their project budget to UXO clearance. The presence of UXO has also caused delays to some projects, and diverts scarce resources and funds away from other projects. The greatest need for infrastructure development occurs in remote areas of the eastern part of the country, yet these are often the areas with the greatest number of UXO. Even urban areas are not free of the problem. In some towns, rebuilding of houses, schools and hospitals after the war took place on sites which were not cleared, and UXO can still be found under floors. Urban development in provincial capitals and towns is hampered by the threat of UXO buried below the surface.

The treatment of UXO casualties places a burden on the existing limited medical facilities. The extra cost to treat victims has to be borne partially by the state medical system and partially by the victims family, and those requiring long term treatment become a medical liability. A UXO related accident involving one or two family members can push a relatively prosperous rural family into abject poverty. Accident victims are often unable to work and carry out the labour needed in a subsistence rural economy. They therefore become dependent on their family and village, often with the consequence that the community falls further into poverty. ■



One of the 400 NPA deminers in Mozambique. The blue color of their uniforms is chosen to avoid any confusion that this is a military unit.

UXO LAO – Lao National

Unexploded Ordnance Programme

Contributions and Pledges (as of 16 May 1996)

Cash Donations	US Dollars
Received	
Norway	\$712,025
UNDP	400,00
Australia	234,375
New Zealand	204,000
Netherlands	200,000
United Kingdom	138,020
Private Donations	200

Pledged

Australia	460,000 (additional)
Sweden	400,000

In-Kind Contributions

United States	Training Equipment
Germany	Clearance in Houaphan Province